

Bush bans funds for international family planning groups that support abortion

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In one of his first actions as president, George W. Bush on Monday reinstated a ban first initiated under the Reagan administration which will deny US aid to international organizations that use their own money to provide abortions, counsel women on abortions or support pro-abortion lobbying of foreign governments. Clinton had lifted the ban—known among its opponents as the “global gag rule”—when he assumed office in 1993.

Bush timed his announcement to coincide with the twenty-eighth anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision of the US Supreme Court legalizing abortion. Thousands of anti-abortionists rallied outside the high court in Washington on Monday in their annual rally calling for the overturning of a woman's right to choose. The “right to life” forces, feeling emboldened with an ally in the White House, carried signs such as “Michigan Loves Our Pro-Life President” and “It's War! Baby.” A message from Bush was read out to the crowd, which said in part: “We share a great goal: to work toward a day when every child is welcomed in life and protected in law.”

International family planning organizations, however, were quick to point out that the effect of Bush's initiative will lead not to “a culture of life” but to increased poverty, suffering and death. It will result in the cutoff of family planning funds to some of the world's most impoverished women and families in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the countries of the former Soviet Union. Critics note that as a result more women will be denied contraceptive services, face unwanted pregnancies and die as a result of childbirth or illegal abortions. Funds for programs aimed at stopping sexual transmission of the HIV virus that causes AIDS will also be impacted, resulting in more disease and death.

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), one of the agencies affected by the ban, is one of the largest providers of sexual and reproductive health services in the world, working through more than 150 autonomous national family planning associations in 82 countries. In 2000, the US earmarked \$5 million in funding to the IPPF out of \$425 million it allocates to such agencies worldwide.

Some of the wide array of services provided by IPPF that will be affected by the ban include: drop-in centers in Lima, Peru, providing counseling and referrals to more than 5,000 young people; a youth center in Tirana, Albania that provides condoms, emergency contraception and medical referrals; the “Be-Wise” youth center in Ghana that provides sexual and reproductive health services to youth, including HIV prevention counseling. In Russia, IPPF programs that have resulted in a noticeable decline in the number of abortions performed will be cut back.

Fiona Salter of the IPPF told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The decision will affect the poorest of the poor—those most in need of information and education.” She said that this would impact “developing and Third World countries at a time when these programs are needed for people to climb out of poverty.” This year alone, 600,000 women worldwide will die due to complications of pregnancy and 300 million will seek family planning services but will not be able to find them.

In impoverished countries which are already suffering from AIDS epidemics and economic austerity programs dictated by the International Monetary Fund, the ban on funds to organizations providing family planning services will undoubtedly exacerbate the social crisis. Any actions hindering population control will have a devastating effect. Additionally, the prohibition on

funds is clearly punitive, as these organizations have been using their own money for abortion-related services all along, but will now be penalized by the elimination of funds for other programs.

Bush's actions give new meaning to the references to “civility,” “compassion” and “courage” in his inaugural speech on Saturday. By executive fiat—without consultation with the American population or Congress—he has taken an action showing callous disregard towards people in the underdeveloped countries. What courage does it take to impose widespread misery with one stroke of the pen? What compassion is demonstrated by an action which means more women will die in back-alley abortions?

Moreover, Bush's edict is a precursor of plans he and his right-wing constituency have to further restrict the reproductive rights of women in the US. Kate Michelman, president of the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL), commented: “This should serve as a wake-up call to anyone who thought Bush would not be a threat to a woman's right to choose. Bush's actions and statements have demonstrated his agenda to restrict access to reproductive health services for women whenever possible. He has clearly decided to ignore the will of the American people—a majority of whom are pro-choice, pro-family planning, and voted for a pro-choice candidate in 2000.”

Bills banning so-called “partial-birth abortions” were twice passed by Congress, but were vetoed by Clinton. Bush would be certain to allow such restrictions to be signed into law. In addition, in the event of new vacancies on the Supreme Court, he is expected to appoint opponents of abortion to the high court. Although the Republican candidate downplayed the abortion issue during his campaign, Monday's action shows that he is intent on pursuing a “pro-life” agenda in his administration.

The speed with which Bush moved to impose this ban on aid is also significant. Although funding renewal for these organizations does not come due until mid-February, he decided to act now in an effort to energize his extreme right-wing base. This action is of a piece with his decision to nominate John Ashcroft for attorney general—a rabid opponent of women's reproductive rights, including opposition to contraception as well as abortion in cases of rape and incest.

Without any serious opposition on the part of Democrats in the Senate, Bush's most controversial cabinet nominees—including Ashcroft and Gail Norton as interior secretary—appear likely to be confirmed. Many of Bush's proposals on education reform—which include school vouchers and the closing of so-called failing schools—have the support of Democrats, including former Democratic vice-presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman.

With Monday's ruling on the overseas aid, Bush is sending a signal that the “inclusion” which he pledged during the election campaign does not apply either to the pro-choice majority in the United States or the worldwide majority of people who are poor and/or female. The new administration aims to curtail the democratic rights of the majority at the expense of the privileged elite. And Democratic Party leaders, despite their lip-service to abortion rights, will provide the margin of support Bush and the Republicans will need to pursue this agenda.

Following a meeting at the White House between Bush and a number of Democratic Party leaders, former Senator Paul Simon (Dem.-Ill.) commented: “My feeling is, the president is going to reach out.” The question might be asked: to whom?



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